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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine the perceptions of young people in attributing the causes of poverty in our society. The study also examined youth's attribution of the state of poverty of three target groups: blacks, whites, and American Indians. Data were collected through structured interviews with 842 white and black children aged five through seventeen, from a large city. Responses were categorized as attributing poverty to structural factors, fatalistic factors, individualistic factors, and inadequate education. Young children typically cited fatalistic reasons (e.g., robbers took the people's money) for poverty. Children in grades three through eleven primarily gave structural reasons, for example, inflation or discrimination. Children frequently attributed the poverty of blacks and Indians to individualistic factors, most often criminality and racial discrimination. Fifteen percent of the children expressed disbelief that white people can be poor. (Author/MK)

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Perception and Attribution of Poverty by Youth

by Terrence S. Luce

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UD021508

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ABSTRACT

Perception and Attribution of Poverty by Youth

The present study examines the perceptions of youth (ages 5-17) in attributing the causes of poverty in our society. The study further examines youth's attribution of the state of poverty of selected target groups (Blacks, Whites, and Indians), and how the proposed causations of poverty vary as a fuction of target group membership. Results of the study are discussed in terms of political socialization of children and in terms of labeling theory or stereotyping.

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A recent book by sociologist Micheal Lewis (1978) analyzes the conceptions of poverty and of the poor thoughout our nation's history. His analysis reveals the pervasive strain of the "Gospel of Individualism" as applied to inequalities in society.

> The dominant interpretation of disadvantage however, held it the result of personal ineptness or misbehavior and therefore a sign of moral inferiority..... To be poor, to have suffered disadvantage, was taken to mean failure to make the most of an abundance of chances: through sloth, venality, or simple ineptitude, one had not exerted sufficient productive effort, and having done less than one might, one had done ill.

Survey data from several national polls would seem to reinforce Lewis's interpretation of the American public's perception of poverty and of the poor. A Gallup poll in 1964 reported that 33% of the American public attributed the state of poverty to the lack of the effort on the part of the poor; by 1967, this figure had risen to 42%. In addition to such perception it appears that the elimination of poverty in society is not of paramount concern to the American people. Watts and Free (1973) presented 27 national issues of concern to their subjects. The reduction of poverty ranked twelfth, behind such issues as air pollution, the war in Viet Nam, crime, drug addition, and garbage disposal. A 1973 article on the influence of one's political ideology on the perception of disadvantaged persons begins, "The American people are not typically favorably disposed toward the disadvantaged." (Long, 1974) This study, utilizing undergraduates at two major universities, found that political ideology did indeed relate strongly to one's perception of disadvantaged persons. The conservatives of their population cited Individualistic explanations for people being successful or unsuccessful economically, while liberals were more likely to cite Structural or Fatalistic explanations for such success or failure.

Further, the most conservative subjects of their sample perceived disadvantaged students as inferior to the more advantaged students in several areas of intellectual functioning.

The most comprehensive study done on perceived causations of poverty was by Feagin (1975), who conducted a nationwide survey* to examine the beliefs about poverty in the United States. Respondents were ask to rate the importance of a list of reasons why some people are poor in the United States. The reasons can be grouped into three major explanatory categories:

> (1) individualistic explanations, which place the responsibility for poverty primarily on the poor themselves; (2) structural explanations, which blame external social and economic forces; and (3) fatalistic explanations, which cite such factors as bad luck, illness, and the like.

Preference for the Individualistic(as opposed to Fatalistic or Structural) explanations for a person's behavior are found in the works of Jones and Harris (1967), who were operating from an Attribution Theory perspective. They discovered the perceivers fail to consider constraints that a social role situation may impose on a subject. Such research has been termed by Ross and et.al (1977), as "the observers' tendencies to over-estimate the role of dispositional factors and to underestimate the causal significance of situational forces....."

A Smith & Kleugel (1980) survey reveals a paucity of research on subjective interpretations of poverty, and a virtual absence of research utilizing children or young people in an attempt to understand their developing perspectives on poverty causation. Previous research on developing political awareness clearly reveals that quite young children do indeed have a political consciousness, and that it changes qualitatively as a function of age. Greenstein (1965) reports that approximately 65% of ten year old children express commitment for a party label, including that of Independent.

*It should be noted that the data for the Feagin study were collected in 1969.

Hess and Torney (1967) find even greater percentages of partisan identification in this age group.

Furthermore, a study by Merelman (1975) found that adolescents possess the capability to see the causal relationships between "distal social problems" and personal consequences. Utilizing a poverty scenario, this study found that their adolescent subjects, who themselves were affluent, nevertheless recognized implications of the condition of poverty of others on their (the adolescents') personal lives.

At present, only data from adults exist with respect to attribution of the causes of poverty, and no data exist with respect to proposed causes of poverty of selected minority groups in our society. The present study examines the developing perceptions of youth, ages 5-17, in attributing causes of poverty in our society. The study further examines youth's attribution of the causes of poverty of selected target groups; Black, Whites, and Indians, The role of socioeconomic status and race of subjects in attributing causes of poverty will also be examined.

PROCEDURES

Structured interviews were conducted with 842 school children in a major southwestern city. Both high and low socioeconomic White subjects, and low socioeconomic Black subjects were utilized for the research* The high socioeconomic White subjects were from a private high-tuition school, with virtually 100% of its graduates entering colleges and universities. The low socioeconomic subjects, Black and White, were from integrated public schools from the lowest socioeconomic area of the city.

* Approximately forty subjects were utilized for each of the three groups, at each grade level, for a total of 120 Ss at each grade level.

All data were collected at the children's schools, with individual interviews conducted for the five and six year old children (kindergarden and first graders), and group interview procedures used for the older children (ages 7-17). Each subject was ask to explain why some people in our society are poor. The five and six year old children gave their explanations verbally into a tape recorder as they sat with the research assistant. Beginning with the seven year olds, who had writing capability, the explanations for the conditions of poverty were written on a supplied response sheet. Next, each subject was shown photographs, one at a time, of a White male and female, a Black male and female, and an Indian male and female, and was told to pretend that each of the persons shown in the photo was poor. They were then to explain why each such person shown was in a state of poverty.

"We are now going to show you some pictures of people. We are going to pretend (or make believe, for the younger children) that each of these people is poor. I want you to tell why you think that that person, or persons like that person shown in the photo, is poor. You can give as many reasons as you want."

RESULTS

A content analysis was performed on all responses. The three categories which were utilized initially for the content analysis had emerged from previous research by Feagin. They were : Structural factors, Individualistic factors, and Fatalistic factors (described earlier). A fourth factor emerged from the present content analysis : Inadequate Education, as a proposed explanation for poverty.

Only four percent of all responses were uninterpretable, with most of these being responses at the earliest grade level. Inter-rater reliability was one hundred percent, since most responses clearly fell into one of the four explanatory categories.

Since the data are categorical, the statistical treatment used was the Lawshe-Baker Nomograph for testing the significance of the difference between two proportions. Statistical differences were tested at each of the seven grade levels used in the study. Table 1 presents results of the tests of differences between proportions, or percentages of responses, given at each grade level. This was done for all grade levels-an attempt to determine group differences in attributing causes of poverty. The significance tests are for differences between the highest and lowest percentages of responses at each grade level. Graph No. 1 depicts the aggregated responses of all three groups(high income Whites, low income Blacks, and low income White) to the question of the causation of poverty. Visual inspection of the graph reveals that at the earliest grade level (age 5), Individualistic reasons are those most frequently given as an explanation for the state of poverty. Fatalistic and Structural reasons are offered with less frequency. Beginning at age 8, (3rd grade), Structural reasons for poverty become more prevalent, with Individualistic and Fatalistic explanations declining. This trend continues through the seventeen year old age group(grade 11), at which point all of the major categories of explanation for poverty are vying. Structural reasons, as noted on the Graph 1, remain as the primary reasons given by seventeen year olds as an explanation for the state of poverty. Only a small percentage of responses of Inadequate Education as a reason for poverty is given at age thirteen (7th grade), at which point such responses begin to grow, and continue as explanatory reason though the 11th grade level.

Graph s No. 2,3,4,5 each depict one of the four categories of proposed poverty causation, presenting each of the three groups' response percentages. Each graph shown has an associated table of significance test e.g. Table 2 presents the significance tests for Graph 2, etc.

Graph No. 2, which presents the Structural explanations for poverty of the three groups, reveals considerable difference among the groups in attributing Structural reasons for the condition of poverty. Table 2 indicates significant differences of proportions at four of the seven grade levels. Graph 3 which presents Individualistic reasons for the condition of poverty, reveals considerable difference among the groups at the earlier grade levels, and less difference at later grade levels. Table 3 shows statistical significance at grades K, 1, 3, and 7 only. Graph No. 4 depicts the responses of Fatalistic explanations for the condition of poverty as offered by the 3 groups. Visual inspection of this graph indicates greater differences between groups in the earlier grade levels, and much greater agreement at the later levels. Table 4 indicates statistical significance only at grade levels K and 3. Graph No. 5 presents the percentages of responses of Inadequate Education as proposed causes of poverty for the three groups. Such proposed causes are virtually nonexistent at the earliest grade levels, but are offered with much greater frequency by all three groups at the later grade levels. Visual inspection of the graph indicates close agreement among all three groups in offering Inadequate Education reasons for poverty. Table 5 reveals no significant differences between the groups at any grade level.

Most of the Individualistic reasons proposed by all three groups to the general question of causes of poverty were laziness, lack of ambition, over-indulgence in alcohol or drugs, and poor use of economic resources. But it is only in reaction to the Black and Indian photos that any subjects offered Criminality reasons for poverty. Graphs No. 6 & 7 present the percentages of Criminality responses to the Black and Indian photos, respectively, of the high-income and low-income White subjects at all grade levels,

There was not a single instance of any Black subject attributing criminal behavior on the part of Whites as a cause of poverty. Nor was there a single instance of a White youth attributing the cause of White poverty to criminal behavior! It appears that criminal behavior as a cause of poverty is reserved for Blacks and Indians, but never for Whites. Table No. 6 shows significant differences among the groups at the first five grade levels, but not at the highest two. Table No. 7 shows significant differences at earlier grade levels -- 1,3, and 5, but for none of the three later age levels.

Graphs 8 & 9 present the Structural responses of Racial Discrimination of the three groups in response to the Black photos and the Indian photos, respectively. Inspection of Graph No. 8 indicates few group differences at the early grade levels, but considerable variation in response percentages among the groups at the later grade levels. Table No. 8 indicates significant differences at grade levels 5, 7, and 9 only. A visual inspection of Graph No. 9, (responses to the Indian photos) indicates considerable agreement amongst the three groups in their offering Racial Discrimination explanations for poverty of Indians. Table No. 9 reveals no significant differences between the groups at any of the grade levels.

Finally, approximately fifteen percent of all three groups expressed disbelief that White people can be poor.

DISCUSSION

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of the present study is the uncovering of explanatory economic schema which exist in the minds of children as young as five. Approximately 60% of this age group was able to respond with some type of explanation to the question of why people are poor. Their responses reveal both economic reality and concrete cause and effect propositions. The primary economic reality which they hold is the relationship between not having a job and being poor. They

reflect also the economic awareness of having lost one's job and consequent poverty. The concrete cause and effect propositions which children of this age hold about poverty are reflected primarily in their responses which cite Fatalistic reasons for poverty. Typical responses in this category are, "Robbers took all their money and made them poor", "Their house burned down and they lost everything", and "Somebody shot them and they got poor". In these instances, there is the interpretation of economic well-being as consisting of just those objects which are present and tangible (and therefore potentially removeable) and the state of poverty. What you have is what you can see and touch. Such a perception of economics is readily apparent to parents of young children who, upon being told they can not have a new bicycle because Daddy does not have the money, respond, "Just go to the bank and get some".

As noted earlier, the Structural reasons for poverty (inflation, discrimination, unemployment, etc.) were the primary reasons given by children from 3rd grade though 11th grade. The less important perceptions of the causes of poverty in the minds of these young people, are Individualistic reasons for poverty. Such findings are in sharp contrast to the only other study which examined proposed causations of poverty in our society, the Feagin study, which utilized only adults. How can one explain the apparent conflicting results of adults claiming that poverty is primarily a function of individual shortcomings, while children offer more varied reasons, and claim that the paramount reasons for poverty are built into structure of society? It must be noted that the Feagin data were collected in 1969, while data from the present study were collected in late 1979. A tentative explanation for the apparently more sophisticated responses of the young may be that in 1979, with the state of the economy so shaky in recent years, the media, parents, and peers may discuss economic matters quite extensively.

Such a condition could create a high degree of economic awareness and sophistication in quite young persons. Pursuing such an explanation, it is also possible that the advent of the Women's Movement and the consequent depiction of the Structural condition of sexism in our society, provide additional explanatory reasons for joblessness, under-employment and consequent poverty (at least for women).

Support for such an explanation may be found in a recent study by Sigel and Hoskin (1975), in which 17-20 year olds revealed themselves to be more critical than older adults of the government's treatment of the poor, the aged, and the helpless. These young adults were also more inclined to fault the Government for persistence of discrimination in the United States. Such findings as those of Sigel and Hoskin and those of the present study may reveal a picture of our young as having early political sophistication, but being unemcumbered with rigid political ideology. In contrast to the Sigel & Hoskin subjects, subjects in the present study attribute discrimination against minorities not to the Government, but rather to individuals and employers.

However, even if the above interpretation is somewhat accurate, additional data in the present study reveal the young to be not totally characterized by a naive idealism. Stereotyped responses to the minority members' photos (Black and Indian) begin with the five year olds in the sample, with such responses occuring thoughout the highest age group in the study. Among the Individualistic attribution responses given for the state of poverty of Black and Indians, a full 54% were criminality responses. That is, for those subjects who attributed the poverty of Blacks and Indians to personal or Individualistic reasons, more than half of those reasons were the alleged criminal behavior of these minority groups. Typical responses are "They must have just got out of jail", and "He

spent all his money on dope and went to jail because of it". As noted earlier, only the White groups in the present study give criminality responses as reasons for poverty for minority groups-and only for minority groups were criminality reasons set forth as causations of poverty. Not one response from a Black subject in the sample was a criminality response. In addition, there was not one instance of any subject explaining the White persons poverty in criminality terms. A further stereotype on the part of the young subjects reflected a belief in the "Tomahawk Indian". Typical responses were "He lives on a reservation and had to hunt for food and can't find any," or, Buffalo ran out and he has no food." This latter stereotype is especially noteworthy, since the city in which the research was conducted has more Indian residents than any other city in the United States. It is clear that significant proportions of these young people are very early attributing negative characteristics to these minority groups.

The present study made no attempt to determine the origins of the economic schema portrayed by these young people. This is a task for future researchers. It is clear, from the current study, that young people often equate poverty with character defect, and view poverty as an exclusively minority group issue (recall that a full fifteen percent of all groups refused even to pretend that Whites are poor). Derogatory economic stereotypes are alive and well, and present in children as young as five.

But let us end on a somewhat optomistic note. Not one response of any subject attributed poverty to genetic or racial inferiority of the two minority groups considered in this study.

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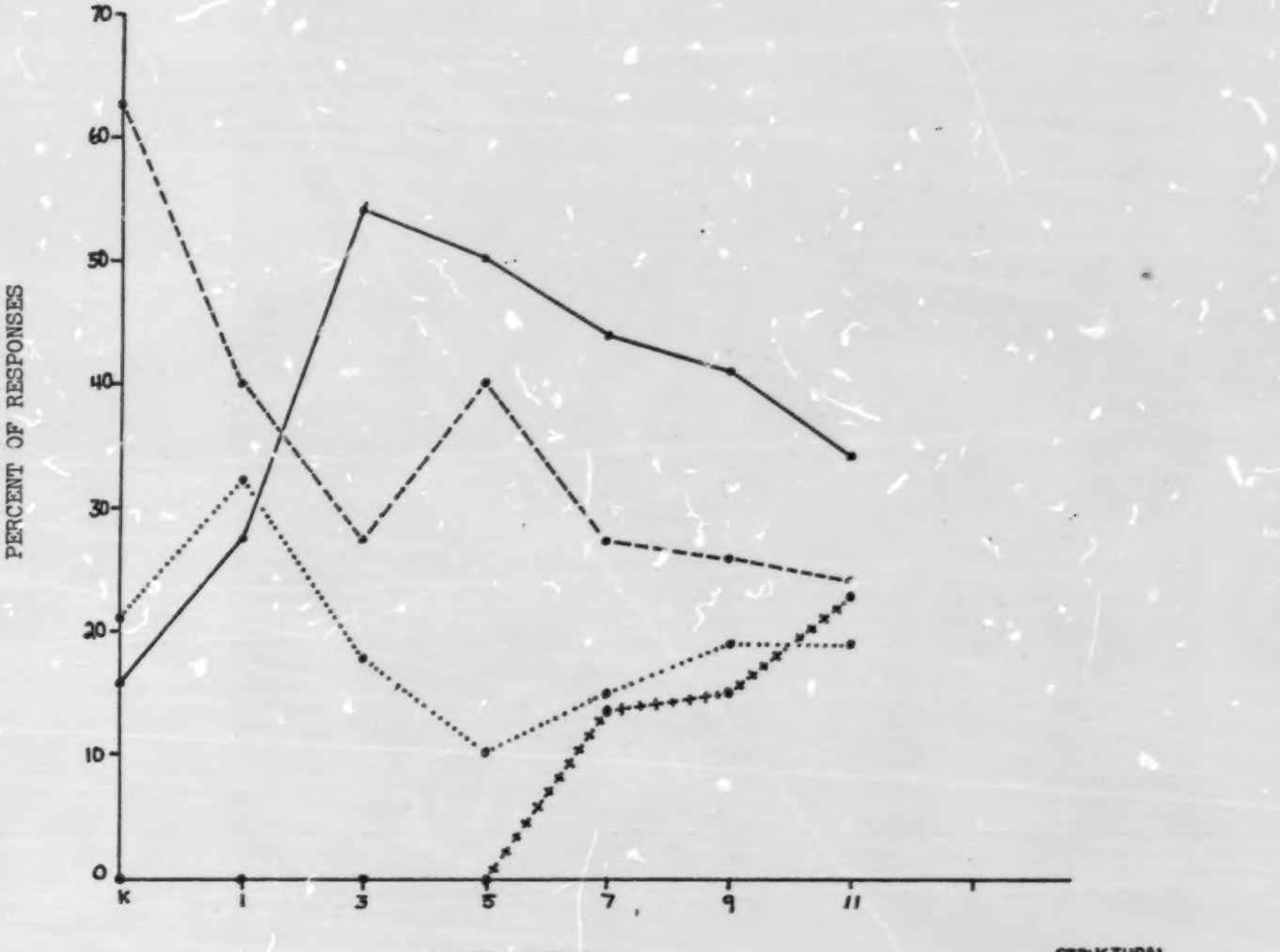
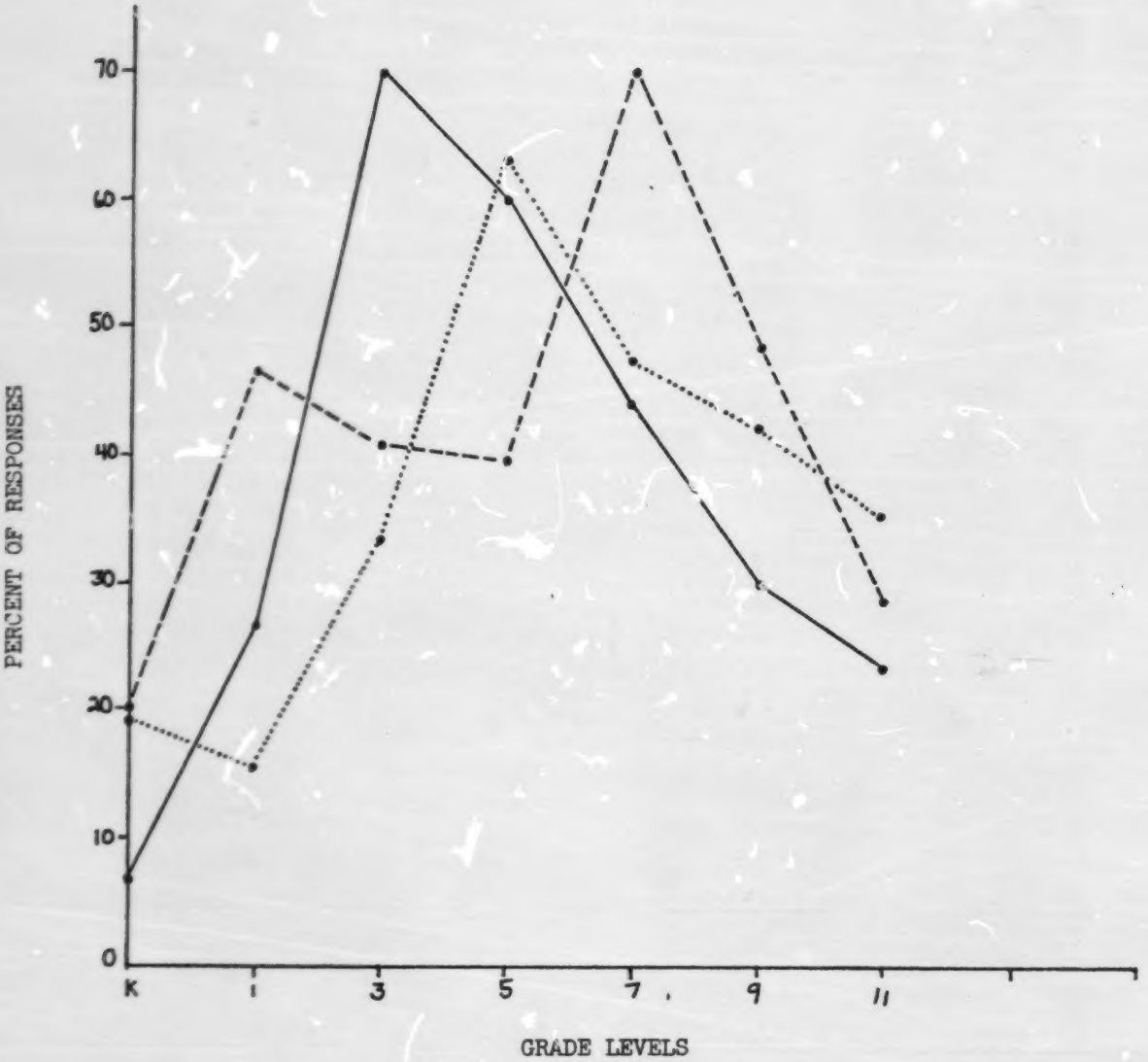
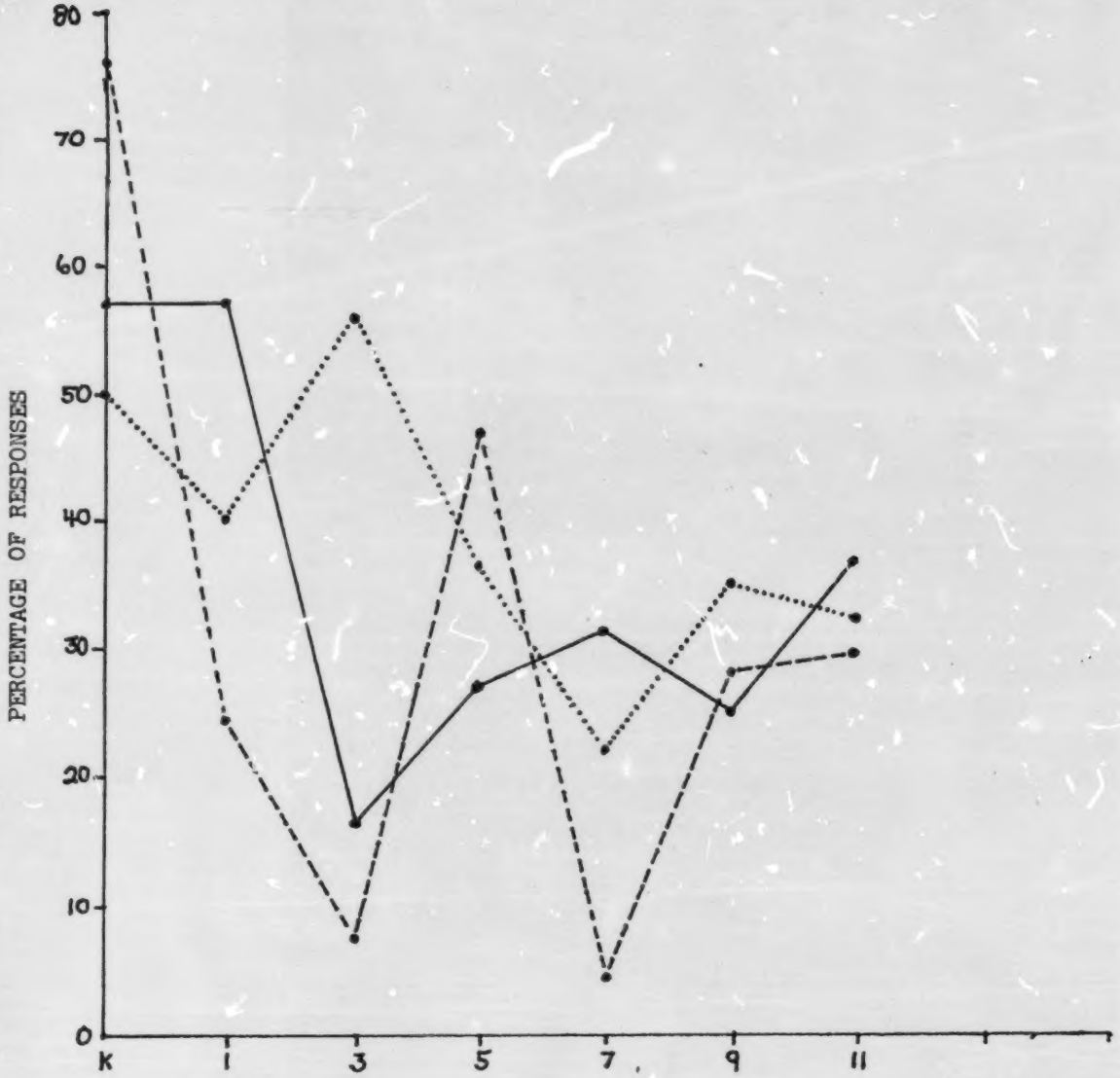


Proposed Causes of Poverty:
(Percentages Aggregated, all subjects)

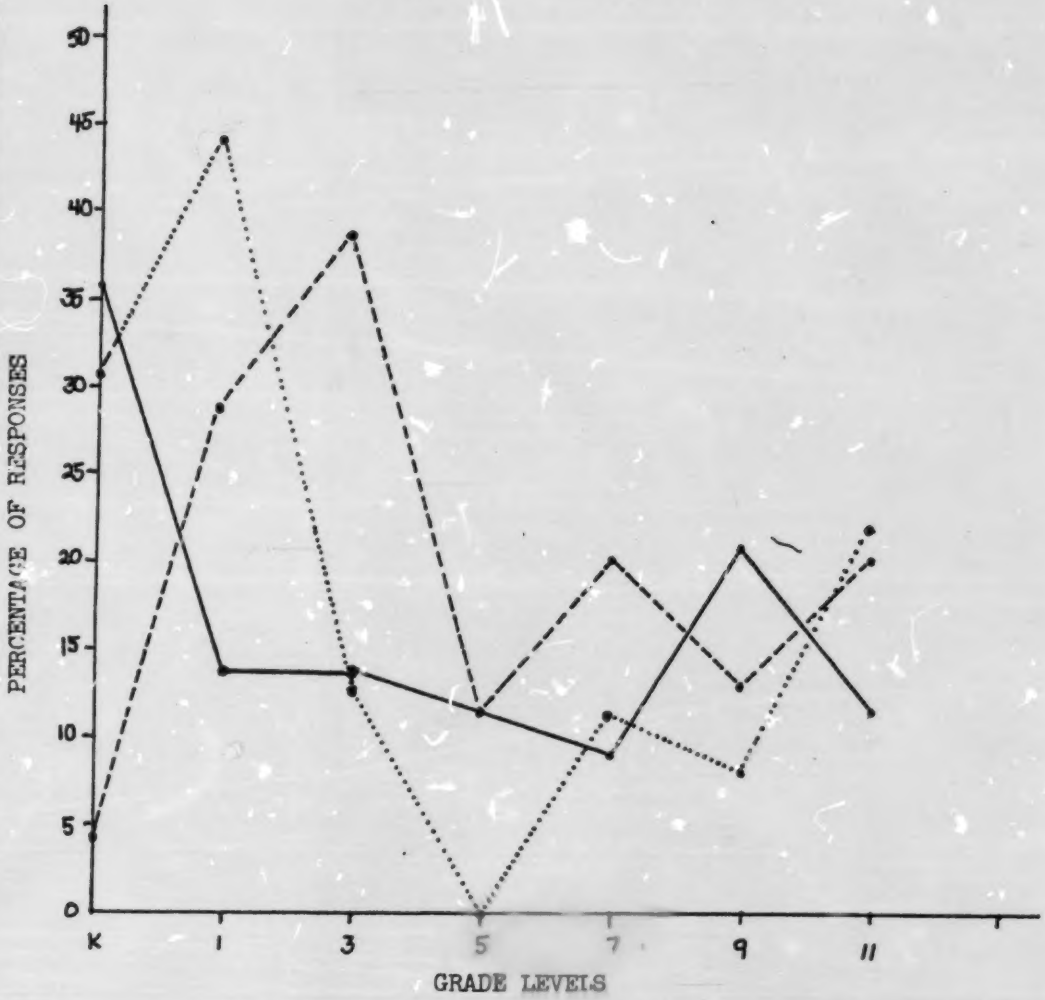


Distribution of "Structural" Responses as Proposed Causes of Poverty.

No. 2

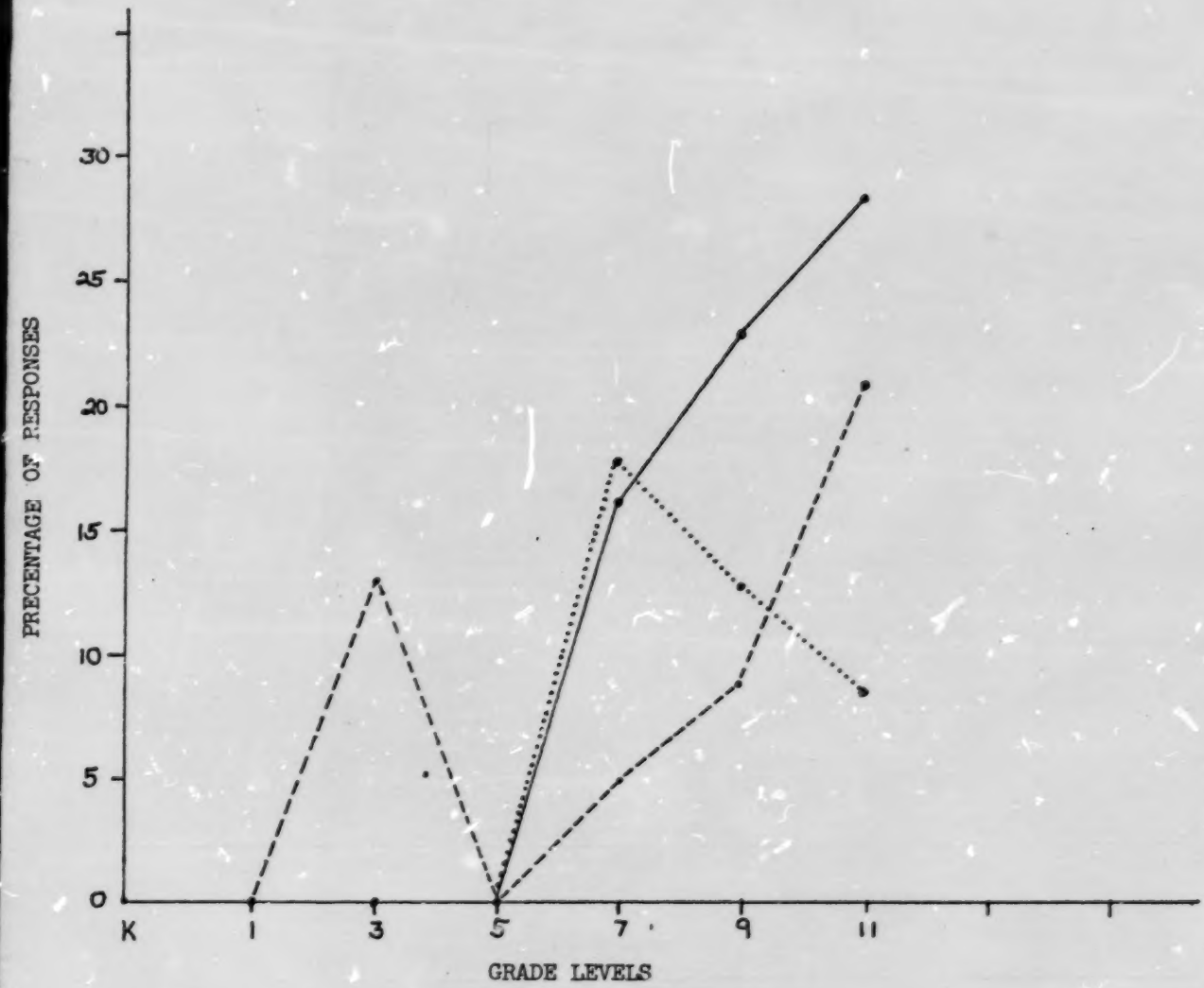


Distribution of "Individualistic" Responses as Proposed Causes of Poverty



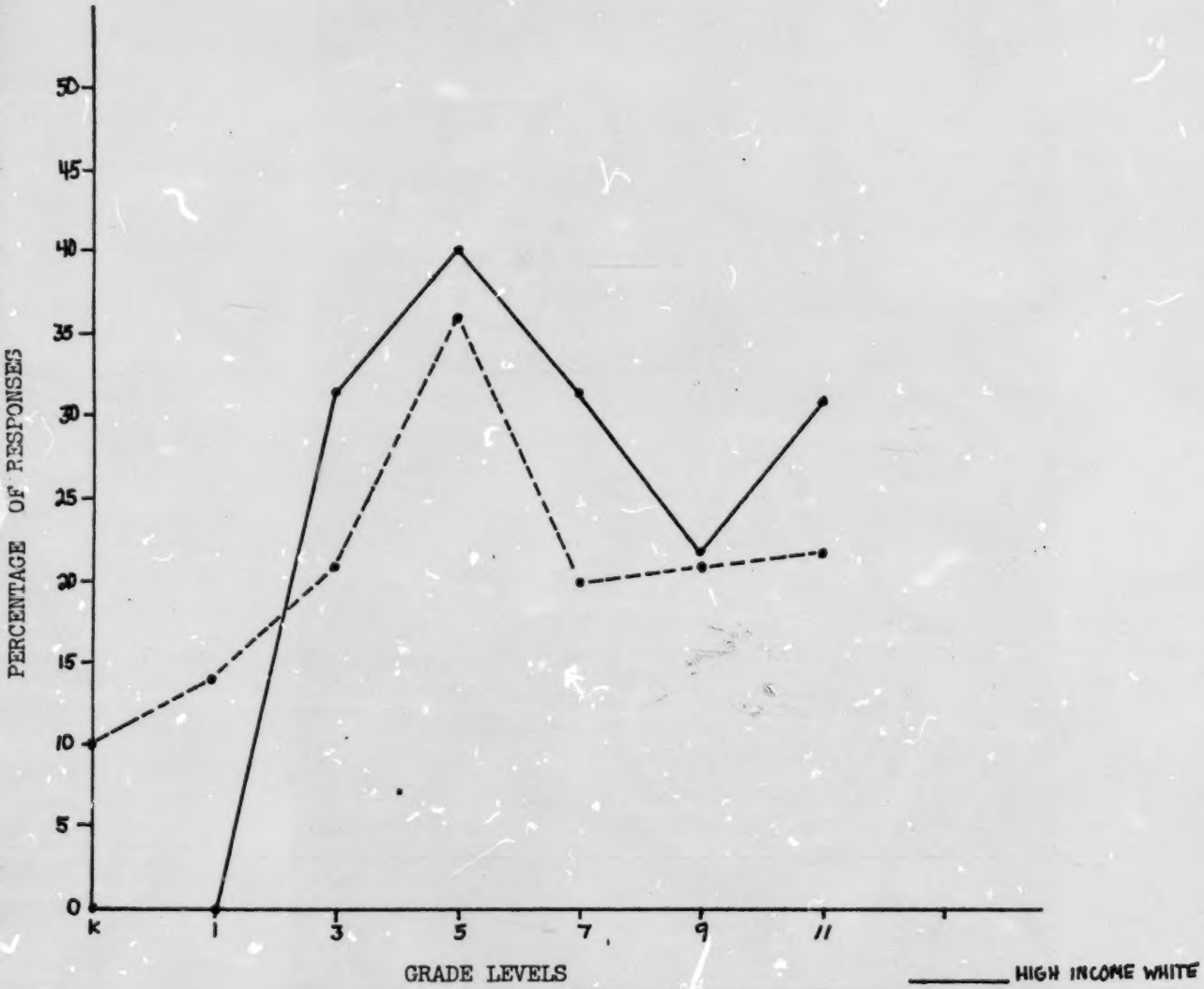
Distribution of "Fatalistic" Responses as Proposed Causes of Poverty

No. 4



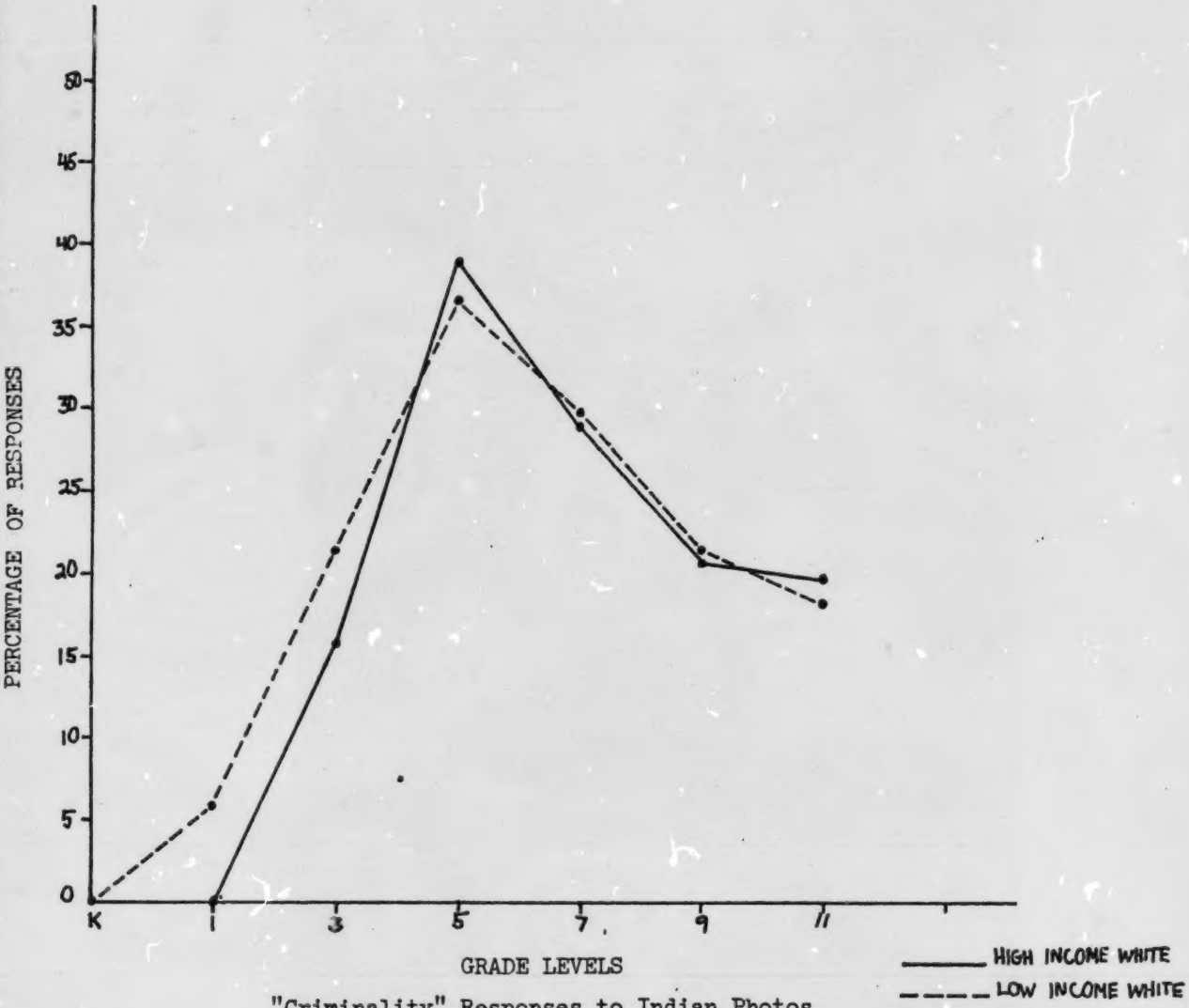
Distribution of "Inadequate Education" as Proposed Causes of Poverty

No. 5



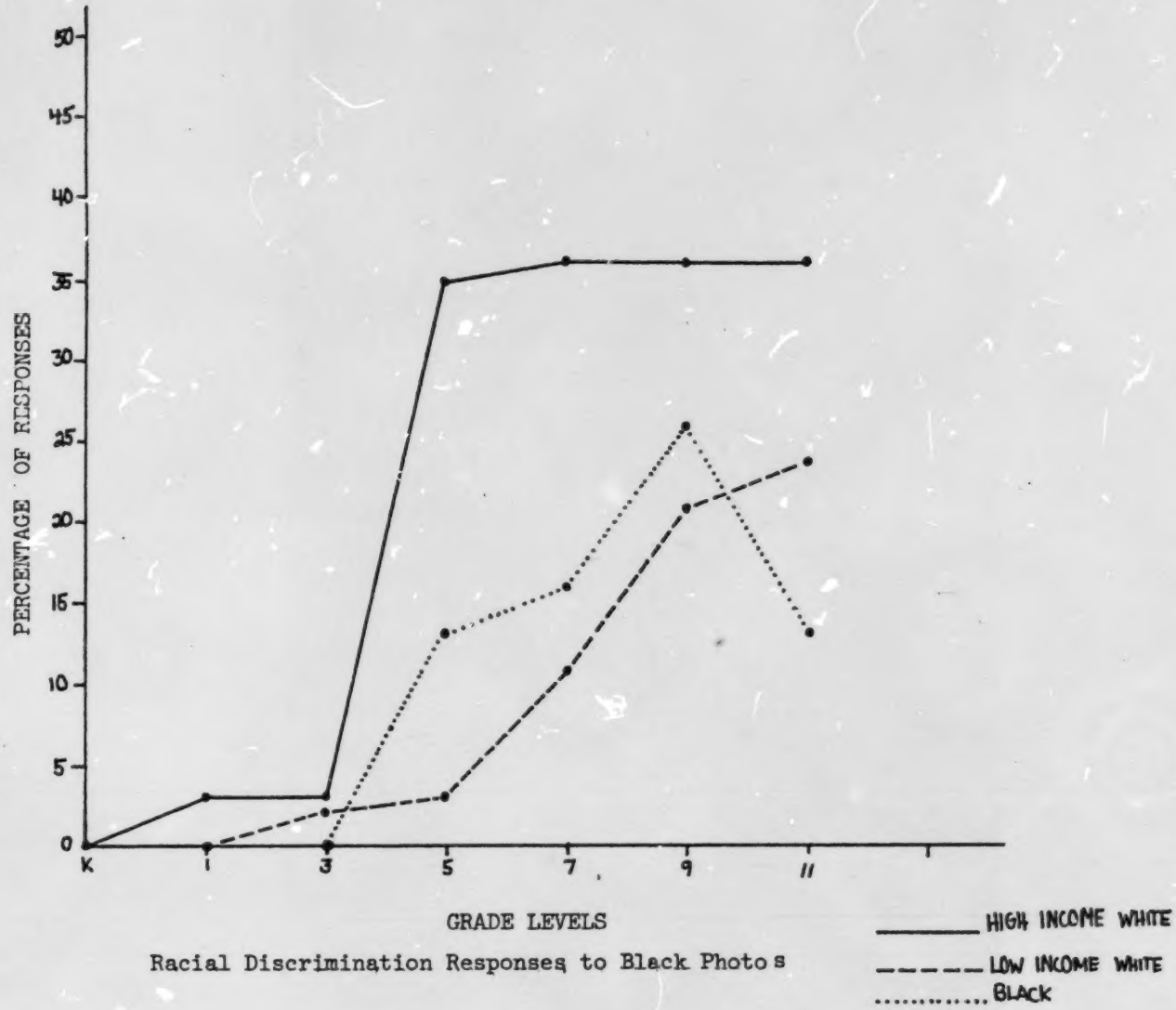
"Criminality" Responses to Black Photos

No.6



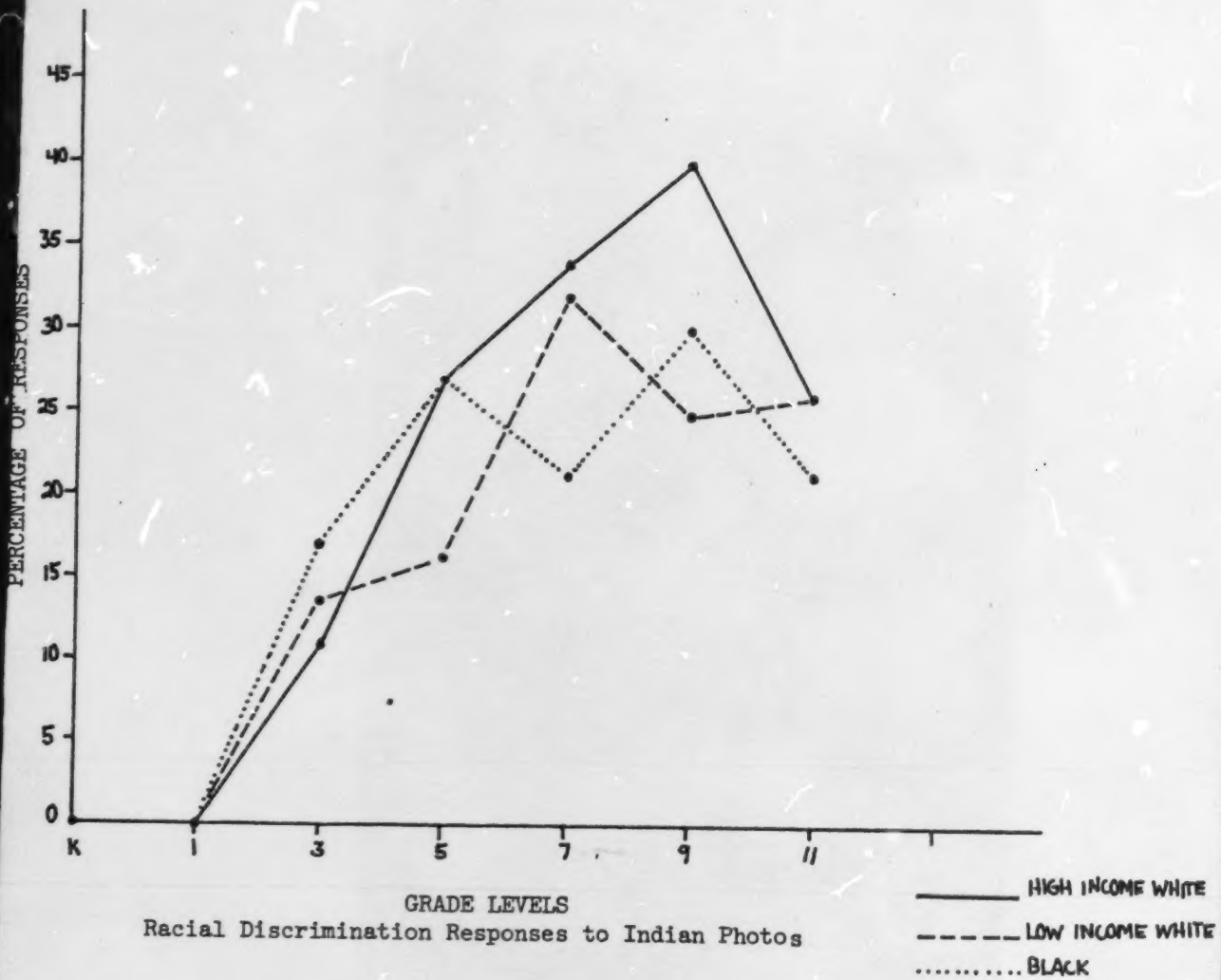
"Criminality" Responses to Indian Photos

No. 7



Racial Discrimination Responses to Black Photos

No. 8



Racial Discrimination Responses to Indian Photos

No. 9

TABLE 1

K t = 4.20**
1 t = 1.20NS
3 t = 3.60**
5 t = 3.30**
7 t = 2.88**
9 t = 2.76**
11 t= 1.32 NS

TABLE 2

K t = 1.68 NS
1 t = 2.94 **
3 t = 3.12 **
5 t = 1.86 NS
7 t = 2.88 **
9 t = 2.80 **
11 t = 1.26 NS

TABLE 3

K t = 2.28*
1 t = 2.94**
3 t = 5.28**
5 t = 1.80 NS
7 t = 3.00 **
9 t = 0.96 NS
11 t = 0.60 NS

TABLE 4

K t = 3.66**
1 t = 1.68 NS
3 t = 2.76 **
5 t = 0.00 NS
7 t = 1.32 NS
9 t = 1.68 NS
11 t = 1.20 NS

TABLE 5

K t = 0.00 NS
1 t = 0.00 NS
3 t = 0.20 NS
5 t = 0.00 NS
7 t = 1.38 NS
9 t = 1.44 NS
11 t = 1.62 NS

TABLE 6

K t = 1.20 NS
1 t = 1.20 NS
3 t = 1.08 NS
5 t = 0.58 NS
7 t = 0.60 NS
9 t = 0.10 NS
11 t = 0.77 NS

TABLE 7

K t = 0.00 NS
1 t = 0.80 NS
3 t = 0.78 NS
5 t = 0.12 NS
7 t = 0.10 NS
9 t = 0.10 NS
11 t = 0.12 NS

TABLE 8

K t = 0.00 NS
1 t = 1.32 NS
3 t = 1.32 NS
5 t = 3.60 **
7 t = 2.46 *
9 t = 1.32 NS
11 t = 2.34*

TABLE 9

K t =0.00 NS
1 t =2.28*
3 t =2.34*
5 t =3.00**
7 t = 1.62 NS
9 t = 0.96 NS
11 t = 1.02 NS

TABLES 1-9
Significance tests of Difference Between Proportions:
From Lawshe-Baker Nomograph

Single Asterisk* Denotes
Significance at .05 Level
Double Asterisk** Denotes
Significance at .01 Level
NS Denotes Non-significance
t=1.98 for .05,df=117
t=2.61 for .01,df=117